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Summary:

Mike and El get stuck on a Tunnel of Love

Useful

Mike was going to *kill* his friends.

They went to the Hawkins Harvest Festival every year, this just happened to be the first year that El was able to come with them. So *of course* the boys had forced him to go in the Tunnel of Love with her.

Ever since Eleven had come back a few weeks ago, the boys were relentless in their teasing of Mike's crush. He refused to even admit that he had one, but they saw right through that. So when El had asked what ride the Tunnel of Love was, of course Lucas countered with, "*Why don't you go on it with Mike and find out?*"

What was he supposed to say? How could he have explained that there was *no way* he wanted to go on that ride with El? He'd either hurt her feelings by saying he didn't want to go with her, or he'd completely humiliate himself by having to explain *why*.

Going on the Tunnel of Love with his crush, who he was *sure* didn't feel the same way, wasn't exactly what Mike wanted to do at the Harvest Festival, but now he was getting strapped into that heart-shaped boat with El by his side, and he knew how completely *whipped* he was.

"What is this ride?" El asked softly besides him, and Mike felt his heart speed up.

"Well, uh, it's called the Tunnel of Love. It's just this stupid, cheesy ride. I've never been on it before, but it's pretty much just the place where couples go so they can make out in the dark."

"Why did Lucas tell me to come on with you?"

Yeah, he was *definitely* going to kill Lucas. Mike wished he was absolutely anywhere but on this ride, "Uh, I don't know," He lied, refusing to meet her eyes. Mike was suddenly very aware of how the bench they were sitting on was in no way built for two people, as he and El were being pushed together just to fit into it. He felt his heart

race and turned away, not letting her see his blush.

El figured he knew more than he was letting on, but decided not to press him on it. *Make out*, that's what Mike had said. It took her a minute to rack her brain full of all the new words and slang she'd learned lately before she remembered what that meant. It was like kissing, and that was certainly a topic El had learned a lot about since coming back.

It had only been a month, but so much had happened since then. El now understood all about dating and relationships and crushes, and shyly admitted to herself that she may have a crush of her own. She had pieced together what that kiss with Mike had meant a year ago, though she wondered what it meant *now*. It was so long ago, she doubted Mike's feelings were the same as they were back when he had kissed her before. Had he liked her then? Even if he had, El couldn't believe that after all this time, he would *still* like her.

El glanced over at Mike, and noticed he was turning a deep scarlet that even in the dark of the ride she could see. The redness highlighted his freckles, making El love them even more than usual. She adored his freckles, and they had quickly become her favorite part of his face. El loved the little stars on his cheeks, and always had to stop herself from reaching out to draw constellations over them.

She turned away, suddenly feeling herself being to blush as well. She shouldn't have a favorite part of his face, that wasn't something friends had for each other. They had their single kiss a year ago, but Mike had made no attempts to do it again. It was a piece of the past. El had to convince herself that now they were friends, and nothing more than that.

They both stared ahead, trying to ignore each other-- and how the small boat was squeezing them up against one another-- and took in the sights all around them. The Tunnel of Love was exactly as Mike had described it-- cheesy. It was so dark they could barely see ahead of them, and the place looked like St. Valentine himself had thrown up all over it. Giant neon hearts hung from the ceiling, with phrases like "Be Mine" and "I Love You" painted over the walls. Little animatronics stood on the side, leaning in as if they were kissing each other. Music played from speakers, and neither of them could identify

it.

Overall, Mike couldn't wrap his mind around how this place was supposed to be *romantic*, it looked more like the set for a horror movie, with the creepy lighting and decorations all around.

Their boat came to a stop, and Mike and El looked ahead to see what had happened. The ride was being blocked by a door, with the words painted on it, "Kiss To Pass."

Mike groaned upon seeing that. It had to just be another cheesy decoration, it wasn't like the ride was *actually* going to force them to kiss.

"Mike, what is this?" El asked, already knowing the answer.

Mike shrugged in response, "It's probably just a decoration or something. How could the ride know if someone's kissing or not?"

"There could be cameras."

They were silent for a moment, waiting to see if the doors would open, but nothing happened. El finally spoke up, feeling herself get red, "It isn't opening."

"Well we could, uh, try to kiss and see if that works?" Mike suddenly wished he was anywhere other than on that ride, not knowing any way out of this situation and his mind spinning too fast to really comprehend what he had just said.

But then El slowly nodded her head, and Mike took a deep breath and shut his eyes as hard as he could, because there was no way he'd be able to look her in the eyes and still find the bravery to do this. He leaned in slowly, and felt his lips make quick contact on El's cheek. He gave her a quick peck before pulling away, feeling like he could drown in embarrassment.

When he opened his eyes, Mike was dismayed to realize the door still hadn't opened. They waited for a moment, but nothing happened.

"Maybe that wasn't what they were asking for?" El broke the silence, her face so flushed she was sure not even the darkness of the ride was

concealing it.

“What do you mean?”

El didn't answer, instead slamming her eyes shut and trying to mute the screaming in her mind for just *one second*. She leaned into Mike and took the leap of faith that was absolutely *terrifying* her.

She kissed him right on the lips, and it felt as if the entire world had paused around them. El was shy at first, her lips delicately on his, while Mike felt like she was sucking out all the air from his lungs. They were both inexperienced, and El was struck with that insecurity that she was probably doing this wrong, that she was a bad kisser and Mike hated this, but Mike's brain was short circuiting too much for him to even notice anything other than the fact that *El was kissing him*.

Normally Mike would have been terrified, and far too scared to do anything in response, but right then the explosions in his brain were too strong for him to think, so he kissed her back. For a few seconds, Mike pushed his lips firmly back on El's, and if he didn't know any better, he would have sworn that he could feel her giving a small smile into the kiss.

When they pulled away, El's mouth was gaping open. Mike felt himself turn even redder, and was taking deep breaths to try and control himself.

They were silent for a moment, staring right at one another, still in that post-kiss trance that had taken hold of them. It was hypnotizing, and if nothing interrupted them, they probably could have stayed there staring at one another forever.

But Mike noticed something that snapped him out of his trance, in the corner of his eye he saw the doors still shut, closing them inside the ride, “It didn't work.”

“What?”

“The doors didn't open. I don't think it needed us to kiss, the ride must be stuck or something.”

El looked down, suddenly screaming at herself. She had *kissed Mike*, and she didn't even have a reason. She should have known there was no way the ride was forcing them to kiss, yet she still jumped at opportunity.

“Oh.” She turned away, feeling completely humiliated, “So, um, I guess that kiss was kinda useless.”

“Uh, yeah,” Mike mumbled to himself, feeling mortified that he had kissed her back, that he had kissed her at all to begin with. She *obviously* didn't want to kiss him, and he felt himself fill up with guilt as he thought about how he had convinced her to do it.

The two stared ahead, refusing to acknowledge one another, just waiting for the doors to open and for the ride to start up so they could escape the awkwardness of the room.

Useless, that was what El had described the kiss as. Mike wanted to scream and pout at that, of course it was useless, what did he think? Did he seriously think that them kissing was magically going to open the door? That was ridiculous, it was useless, but Mike couldn't help the way his heart clenched upon hearing El say that.

He knew he couldn't blame her, and that wasn't fair, but that didn't change how utterly disappointed Mike was about how useless kissing him was to El.

Meanwhile Eleven just stared around the tunnel, taking in all the sights and doing her best to pretend Mike wasn't right there next to her. The music was still playing, and the animatronics kept moving, the tiny robots still “kissing” each other over and over. They must have kissed hundreds of times while they were stuck in there, a thought that made El have to hold in her laughter. It was ridiculous, the animatronics could get kissed while the only way Mike would kiss her was when it was their escape plan. The absolute absurdity of it all made El giggle.

After a while stuck in the ride, impatience grew. El let out a small huff and turned to Mike, “How much longer do you think we're gonna be stuck here?”

“Don't worry about it, worrying's *useless*,” He spat out the last word, staring ahead instead of turning to face her.

El's eyebrows furrowed, and her expression softened into concern, “Are you okay, Mike?”

“Do you care?”

El turned away, hurt by Mike's words. Of course she cared, but his words felt like knives stabbing into her heart. She remained silent, not wanting to push him anymore.

After a few moments of silence, Mike continued, now finally turning to face her, “Did you have to call it useless of all things? You can't even pretend that it wasn't just nothing to you?”

El confusedly watched him, was he was mad that she had called their kiss useless? She figured that was ridiculous. She only called it that so he wouldn't suspect of how much it made her chest ache, as the butterflies trapped within pounded inside her.

“It didn't mean nothing to me,” El whispered to him, her voice quiet and her eyes meeting his.

Mike didn't say anything in response, just rolling his eyes.

“How could it mean nothing, Mike? You're my best friend,” El's voice hitched on the word *friend*, and Mike felt as his heart caught on it too, “You're the only person I'd ever want to kiss.”

Silence overtook the tunnel once more as Mike tried to piece together what she had just said.

“You don't get it.” He looked away, not wanting to see her caring eyes any longer.

“Try me.”

With that, Mike let out an exasperated sigh before yelling out, “It's because this is the second time I've humiliated myself by kissing you when I know you don't feel the same way! It already happened once, and I keep trying to pretend it didn't so I can look you in the eye

without being filled with the shame of knowing that the way I felt kissing you will never be how you feel back! And now I have to go through that humiliation all over again!”

The entire world seemed to fall silent at that, Mike took a few quick breaths before looking away, his voice regaining its normal gentle tone, “I’m sorry I’m being a mouthbreather. I know I’m overreacting, I just need some space.”

El watched him for a minute, her heart was hammering on her chest as she took in everything he had just said. So she pushed everything aside, and asked him the one question that had been pounding on her mind for weeks now, “Do you love me?”

“What?”

“Do you love me, Mike?”

Mike felt as a blush overtook his entire face, “I thought I made that clear.”

“Why would you think I couldn’t love you back?” El put a hand on his shoulder reassuringly.

“Because I know you don’t, El. I’m already surprised that you’d want to be friends with a weirdo like me. Why would you want to be more than friends?” Mike refused to face her once more.

“I’m a weirdo too.” El put her hand onto Mike’s cheek, turning his face towards her.

“No you’re n-”

“I am. We’re both weirdos, but you’re the kindest person I’ve ever met. I don’t know why you would like me, but I know I love you back.”

Mike’s heart sped up, and he wasn’t sure what to do other than follow the apparent gravity that was pulling his face closer to hers. He leaned in, while making sure he didn’t combust right there from all the emotions he was feeling at once.

Right as their lips were about to touch, the ride shifted and bumped them away from each other. The doors opened and the boat began to move again. El let out a small giggle before pulling away, their kiss now interrupted. She settled on giving Mike a short peck on the cheek, their moment for a real kiss now gone.

Mike blushed in response, and settled for putting his arm around El for the duration of the ride. They were quiet, because nothing much could be said after all they had just revealed. El simply leaned into his arms, while Mike was thankful she couldn't see how red his face was.

A minute later the ride was over, the boat halted to a stop once more. Holding hands, the duo stepped off the ride and went to find their friends, who they suspected had gotten everything they wished for out of sending them on this ride.